WAIS: A New Development in Information Services

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In 1989, Apple Computer, Thinking Machines, and Dow Jones began joint development of WAIS (Wide Area Information Servers), a prototype information resource. Their target market was business executives who wanted quick access to large databases and on-line publications, such as the Wall Street Journal. Although some sources are for-pay and not available to the public, anyone on the Internet can access WAIS.

What Is WAIS?

WAIS automates the search and retrieval of many types of electronic information over wide area networks, such as the Internet. What distinguishes WAIS from other information retrieval systems, such as MIT's TechInfo, is its ability to perform full-text searches as opposed to keyword searches. WAIS searches the full text of all documents in its database for the words specified in a user's request. (Keyword searches match your request only against predefined keywords for each document.)

WAIS provides relatively transparent access to data compared to the two-step telnet/ftp process, where you search an Archie database for topics and then retrieve the data from anonymous FTP sites. With WAIS, once the search is complete, documents automatically display on your machine.

WAIS lets you query a variety of databases on the Internet. It provides a consistent user interface for DOS, Macintosh, and UNIX platforms. The information retrieval protocol acts as a translator between the user interface and many types of database servers. This underlying protocol is an extension of the Z39.50 protocol, which was developed as a standard for library information systems.

What Information Is Available?

Although WAIS is fairly new, there are several for-free databases available. Some examples of for-free databases are:

* The CIA World Factbook
* The Columbia Law School Library Card Catalog
* A poetry server (maintained by MIT)
* Weather maps and forecasts

Future sources may include:

* Articles from the Wall Street Journal and Barron's
* The Library of Congress Card Catalog
* The Tech

How to Get to WAIS

There are several ways to get to WAIS. You can telnet to it, access it from Athena, or use the Macintosh or DOS client versions (see the box below).

Functionality as well as stability varies among the test versions of client software. When you download the Macintosh and DOS versions of WAIS from the anonymous FTP sites, be sure to download the documentation as well.

Resources

At present IS doesn't support WAIS. You can get The WAIS Bibliography, by Barbara Lincoln, via anonymous ftp from <quake.think.com> in the directory /pub/wais/wais-discussion/bibliography.txt.

To receive electronic notices of WAIS progress and releases, send e-mail to <wais-discussion-request@think.com> and ask to be added to their subscription list.

How to Get to WAIS

Telnet access: telnet quake.think.com
login wais
password your_username

Athena: At the athena% prompt, type add wais; xwais

DOS Windows: anonymous ftp to <ftp.oit.unc.edu> and download
/pub/wais/UNC/Windows

Macintosh: anonymous ftp to <think.com.> and download
/wais/WAIStation-0-63.sit.hqx.
Note: you will need to use UnStuffIt as well as
Binhex.